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SUBJECT: ANKARA MEDIA REACTION REPORT
THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 7, 2008

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In Today's Papers

Turkish Parliament Passes Headscarf Amendment in First Round of Voting

All papers report the Turkish Parliament met Thursday and voted to change the constitution to lift a ban on wearing Muslim headscarves at universities, a ruling opposed by the CHP and secularist circles.

The headscarf ban will remain in place for teachers and civil servants. In the final vote of the first round, the amendment to the constitution to end the ban was approved by 404 to 92, easily exceeding the required two-thirds majority threshold of 367. The amendment is expected to be approved in a final round of voting on Saturday as both the AKP and MHP have more than a two-thirds majority of seats in parliament.

The views of the AKP were explained by the party's women lawmakers Guldal Aksit, Nursuna Memecan, Ozlem Turkone and Aysenur Bahcekapili. Deputy PM Cemil Cicek criticized the opposition CHP by saying, "You are like the Chernobyl nuclear reactor, spreading radioactive fear and horror. In Turkey, secularism is based on human rights and democracy, different than the secularism concept in North Korea or the Soviet Union." The pro-Kurdish DTP Diyarbakir Deputy Aysel Tugluk said the AKP represents political Islam, but that for the sake of freedoms, they would vote in favor of the amendment. CHP leader Deniz Baykal, after meeting with visiting Turkish Cyprus "Prime Minister" Ferdi Sabit Soyer yesterday, said MHP's support for the draft would increase polarization in society. Baykal pledged the CHP would take the draft to the Constitutional Court. Deputy Parliament Speaker Meral Aksener (MHP) blamed men for the headscarf crisis, saying if men were not involved, the issue could have been solved more easily. Papers also report AKP Deputy Chairman Egemen Bagis told a gathering in Berlin yesterday that women lawmakers should be allowed to wear the headscarf in the parliament.

Leftist Taraf reports "more than 1,000 professors signed a petition to lift the headscarf ban at universities." Mainstream Vatan says "Turkey is polarized between the secularists, Islamists and Kurdish activists." Mainstream Milliyet and leftist-nationalist Cumhuriyet report the AKP government is preparing to reduce the number of members of the Court of Appeals after stern warnings came from the top court about the principle of secularism.

Editorial Commentary on Turban Reforms

Semih Idiz wrote in mainstream Milliyet (2/7): "I explained in an earlier column that EU diplomats were astonished by FM Babacan's efforts to link the headscarf issue to EU reform criteria. Their official message is 'the turban is an internal issue for Turkey.' However, our 'off the record' conversations indicate they are following the issue very closely. The general belief among the EU diplomats is this: 'If the AKP pursues the headscarf issue in the face of rising social tension, the AKP government can show the same determination on Article 301 and the Foundations Law.' Europe does not consider the 'turban freedom' step as a step toward democracy and freedom. Instead, this move is considered an example of Turkey embracing Islam, thereby distancing itself further from Western values. EU diplomats feel no one should ignore the existing religious pressure in local neighborhoods in Turkey. Therefore, the turban issue can speedily turn into a 'rights of those who do not wear the turban' issue. The turban debates clearly show that there is no effective political opposition in Turkey. Because there is no powerful opposition in the parliament, people immediately turn to the military, the streets or the judiciary to defend their rights. Secular circles also made mistakes on the turban issue. If their stance was not so harsh against the turban issue, the AKP would not act so radically, and the whole issue would not be such an intense ideological clash. FM Babacan was right to say that 'such debates damage our image abroad.' However, Babacan must analyze more carefully why Turkey's image is damaged abroad."

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Mehmet Yilmaz commented in mainstream Hurriyet (2/7): "During a meeting in Germany last January, AKP Deputy Chairman Egemen Bagis asserted that woman should be free to wear a headscarf even in the parliament. Although Bagis later claimed this was his personal opinion, we all know that he is not alone in his opinion. This is the main concern of many of those who opposed liberating the headscarf at universities. They believe that, eventually, the headscarf will enter all other public services as well. The AKP government seeks to apply religious rules on social life, with such rules gradually applying to public services as well. This is not a beneficial path for Turkey to follow."

Survey: Headscarf Least Important Factor in Blocking Girls' Education in Turkey

Liberal Radikal carries on its front page an opinion survey conducted by the economic and social research foundation TESEV, which says the headscarf is a minor obstacle to girls' education. Failure to pass the university entrance exam, marriage, and having to work are the main obstacles.

The survey shows 49 percent of female students cannot even attend high school due to their families' objections. Twenty-nine percent of the girls cannot go to university because they fail to pass the university entrance exam. Fourteen percent do not continue onto higher education because they marry, and 10 percent cannot go to university because they have to work. The headscarf ranks eighth in the list of factors that block the education of girls. Only 16 of the interviewed 1557 women, a mere one percent, do not attend university because of the headscarf restrictions. The survey was conducted by a team headed by Bogazici University professors Binnaz Toprak and Ersin Kalaycioglu through one-on-one interviews with 1557 women and 993 men across Turkey in 2004.

Thousands of Kurds Protest Turkish Military Operations against the PKK

Hurriyet, Milliyet, Sabah, Taraf, Radikal, Cumhuriyet, Zaman and others report around 4,000 pro-Kurdish DTP supporters spent last night camping in tents in the border province of Sirnak at the Kasrik passage between the Cudi and Gabar mountains. The protest

aimed to end Turkish military operations against the PKK. DTP Deputy Chair Emine Ayna urged the Turkish Parliament to rescind the motion that authorized operations, and called on the PKK to shift to a position of 'inaction.' The protesters shouted slogans in favor of the PKK and Abdullah Ocalan, asking for the prison conditions of the PKK leader to be improved.

Civilian Court Passes Demirtas Case to Military Court
Hurriyet, Sabah, Taraf, Radikal, Zaman, Yeni Safak and others report a court has ruled that it does not have jurisdiction in the case of forged medical reports involving 182 suspects, including Nurettin Demirtas, the leader of the pro-Kurdish DTP. The Sixth Criminal Court in Ankara ruled to pass the files of the suspects to the Air Force Military Court.

Suspensions Grow Ludwigshafen Blaze a Racist Arson Attack
All papers speculate that the blaze which killed nine Turks in the western German city of Ludwigshafen on February 3 was a racially motivated crime. Five of the victims were children. German police say the cause of the fire is unclear but they are looking into allegations that it was an arson attack. Islamist-oriented Yeni Safak and Zaman as well as several mainstream papers say suspicions were growing that arsonists were responsible for the fire, and "racist young men" had threatened a family who lost members in the blaze. Prime Minister Erdogan, due to meet Chancellor Angela Merkel on Friday, will visit the site tomorrow. On Wednesday, German integration commissioner Maria Boehmer laid a wreath at the site of the blaze. Visiting Turkish State Minister Sait Yazicioglu, attended the wreath-laying with Boehmer, and warned against jumping to premature conclusions about it being a racially-motivated attack. Papers carry photographs of Boehmer and Yazicioglu hand-in-hand.

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Papers quote German Interior Minister Wolfgang Schaueble as saying Turkey's ambassador to Germany, Mehmet Ali Irtemcelik, "should be taught manners" for saying it was strange German politicians had already concluded that the fire had no "xenophobic motive" before police had found the cause. Mainstream Hurriyet and several television channels report German neighbors shared the grief of Turkish families who lost loved ones in the blaze.

TV Highlights
NTV

Domestic News

- Two police officers were wounded Wednesday night in a roadside bomb attack in Yuksekova in the southeastern province of Hakkari.
- Authorities in the village of Karli in Kocaeli province near Istanbul began culling poultry after bird flu was detected in the region.
- Kamu-Sen labor union has the poverty limit for a family of four calculated as 2,463 YTL, while the monthly minimum food spending for one person amounts to 940 YTL.

International News

- A Turkish freight ship carrying dangerous material caught fire close to Croatian territorial waters in the Adriatic Sea Wednesday. The vessel is likely to sink, but all crew members and passengers were rescued.
- John McCain won the Republican primary in California and in enough other states to gain a clear lead in his party's nomination race.
- Russian deputy FM Alexander Losyukov said the research rocket fired by Iran on Monday "adds to general suspicions that Iran wants to create nuclear weapons."

WILSON